Sermon Series: The Problem with Paul – Sermon #1: "Was Paul A Sexist?"
I Cor. 11:2-16
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There are a lot of parts of the Bible that speak to me – "Love your neighbor" and all that – but parts like this make me cringe. Did Paul really mean what he said? Should women always cover their heads in church? And what about what he says later in two places, I Corinthians and I Timothy, that women should be silent in church and refrain from teaching? Obviously we in this church don't believe that, but we can't just sweep these words under the rug. So what do we do then with these texts? Where do we even start? I'd like to start with a story.

My family moved to Northern Virginia from Southern Indiana when I was in 7th grade. It was a tough move, and I had a hard time making friends. So I was really excited when one of my new friends invited me to go with him and his family to Rehoboth Beach in Delaware for vacation. When I showed up to leave, all ready to go, my friend pulled me aside and asked me, "Now, to get there, we're going to have to cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Are you OK with that?" Being a small town Hoosier boy, I thought this was the strangest question I've ever heard. Why would I have any problems crossing a bridge? I'd crossed dozens of them before going back and forth across the Ohio River. I did have a strong fear of heights, but a bridge is just a bridge, right?

The Chesapeake Bay Bridge is 4.3 miles long, and climbs to a height of 186 feet above the water. That's more than 60 yards tall. Much of the bridge is grated, which means you can look right through the road to the water below. The day we crossed it there was a lot of vacation traffic, so we sat. And I started to look around. And I started to feel a little faint. I made the mistake of looking down, and saw right through the floor to the water 186 feet below. I tried to point this out to my friend, but it's hard to speak when you've swallowed your tongue. Then I decided it would be better to look up, and that's when I saw how much the bridge was swaying in the wind. I don't mean a little movement; I mean our car was doing the Hippy Hippy Shakes 186 feet in the air. I don't remember the rest of the trip across, but my friend tells me it involved the fetal position and cries of "Mommy!"

Dealing with these texts from Paul is like trying to cross this bridge. On one side you have our modern world and culture; on the other side you have Paul's very different world and culture. And in between us is this huge swaying bridge, spanning 20 centuries, across which must travel all our interpretations and understandings. Bringing Paul's meaning into our world is like trying to cross a swaying bridge, and most of the time not everything comes across intact.

We are separated from Paul by language, culture, and time, holding in our hands his words written and copied and recopied and translated and retranslated into our language. And then we have to take something as problematic as today's passage and try to make sense of it. To ask the question, "Is Paul a sexist?" is to apply a label to him that didn't exist in his day. Instead of dragging him across the bridge into our world, we have to travel back to his and ask, "How would Paul's attitude toward women have been perceived in his day?" To answer that, we have to look at the facts.

Paul lived in a time when women and children have a far lower status than today, and women were largely uneducated and illiterate. In our terms, Paul's world was sexist and patriarchal. In light of this, it's not Paul's troublesome comments that would have turned heads, but his progressive comments about women. His negative statements would have fit into the cultural norms of the time, but his comments that value women and plant them front and center in the community would have gotten him kicked out of the Thursday night poker club.

For example, in his influential letter to the Romans, when he is greeting people in the last chapter, the first person he mentions is Phoebe, who delivered the letter to the Romans and helped them interpret it. He calls her a "deacon" of the church, one of the highest positions in the church. In that same chapter, Paul calls several women his co-workers, a designation that shows Paul saw these women as his equal partners. Of the 27 people Paul commends at the end of Romans, 9 of them, or one-third, are women. Of those 27 people, Paul calls four of them "hard-working" – and all four are women. As theologian Julia Foote says, "When Paul said, "Help those women who labor with me in the Gospel", he certainly meant they did more than serve tea." Paul saw these women as his equals, working side-by-side with him, which would have been quite a counter-cultural stand in his day. Paul's model for equal relationships between men and women within the church would have been seen as quite subversive and counter-cultural. He very clearly states that women are equally saved, equally gifted, and equally sent to do God's work. Far from being thought of as against women, in his day Paul would have very much been seen as a champion of women's work in the church.

Even in our troubled passage from I Corinthians, Paul is making some assumptions about women in the church when he says, "and every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." Paul is assuming here that women do pray and prophesy in church. But doesn't that seem to contradict what Paul says about women being silent in church? If we buy the fact that Paul was actually an ally of women, what do we do we these texts once we get them across the bridge?

The key to our understanding is context. Paul was not writing for future generations of believers like us, but was writing for a specific time to address a specific situation. In the Corinthian church, some women had taken their newfound freedom in Christ to mean they had no restrictions in worship, and could let themselves go by letting their hair flow wild and free. But such action was a distraction and kept people – especially men – from focusing on worship. It's like if I wore a rainbow wig during worship, that would distract you from worshipping God. Paul was not restricting women from prophesying in Corinth, but he wants to make sure that they add to the worship, not distract from it. That's why Paul says what he says in I Corinthians. The idea that all women should always cover their heads in church is almost comical to us now, and no one actually believes this.

Paul's other comments about women being silent and not teaching can't be so easily laughed off. But the same principle of context applies. Does Paul mean that all women in all churches at all times should keep silent? Absolutely not, and to apply this passage in such a universal way is an incredibly harmful misreading of Paul's intentions. One of the church's most hurtful errors has been how these passages have been used to keep women from exercising their God-given gifts in church.

What Paul is addressing here is the issue of false teaching, which was a serious threat to the existence of the early church. Some female prophets in the church had been corrupted by some false teachings, and were using the forum of worship to spread these teachings. Paul calls for their submission to the elders of the church for some corrective instructions, and until that time, Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent." Paul is addressing a specific group of women in a specific situation.

Another problem Paul was dealing with was that some of these female prophets were using these false teachings to openly correct or debate the men of the church, some of whom may have been their own husbands. The social reality of the day was that the man was the head of the household, and a public rebuking from his wife would have brought shame and dishonor on the whole house. So Paul says of the women," if they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a women to speak in the church." Again, Paul is addressing a specific group of women in a specific situation.

Logic tells us that if we accept that women no longer should cover their heads because it doesn't fit our modern context, then we should accept that women can and should teach and speak now in our churches for the same reason. To remove Paul's words from his context and try to apply them universally to our world today is not just an example of shaking the bridge; it's burning it.

So what do we do with these texts? Three things: (1) We read them and acknowledge them as important teachings in Paul's day. (2) We accept the larger truths they hold, that everything we do in worship should be to glorify God and help others do the same. (3) We admit that we don't have to take every sentence in the Bible literally to be faithful followers of the word of God.

Was Paul a sexist? Let's close by looking again at our first reading this morning: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That is the most revolutionary thing Paul could say on this subject. Regardless of our gender or social status or cultural boundaries, we are all made into one body through Christ. We all eat the same bread, share the same love, and worship the same God. We are all created in God's image and called to us our gifts for the building up of the church. That is Paul's timeless truth to us. We truly are all one in the Spirit of our Lord, thanks be to God.